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AUTHOR Sanacore, Joseph; Rauch, Sidney J.
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ABSTRACT

After implementing changes in language arts instruction, the principal--who is in a key position to sustain or institutionalize the changes--faces several responsibilities. Factors involved in directing innovations to become "built in" to school programs include solving specific problems, sharing decision-making responsibilities, upgrading and updating staff competence and commitment, making organizational changes, preventing threats to long-term success, and adapting important factors to school settings. Since most innovations are considered in the context of remedying school problems, educators should determine the nature of local problems. Britain's success with the open classroom concept, for example, was inappropriate for American inner-city school systems. Sustaining a program involves efforts that are relevant to different school settings, which has been demonstrated by Miles (1983) in a study of 12 elementary and secondary schools. Environmental fluctuations--budget cuts and declining student enrollment--and educator job mobility can threaten the long-term quality of innovations. Preventive strategies include protecting against budget cuts and providing opportunities for individuals to share their competence. Strong leadership, particularly at the middle management level, is vital in carrying out durable language arts innovations. (CJH)

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Sustaining Language Arts Innovations: Implications for Administrators

by

Dr. Joseph Sanacore and Dr. Sidney J. Rauch

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Dr. Joseph Sanacore is the English/Reading Coordinator for the Hauppauge School District and an Assistant Professor at Hofstra University. Dr. Sidney J. Rauch is a Professor at Hofstra University

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SUSTAINING LANGUAGE ARTS INNOVATIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS

by

Joseph Sanacore and Sidney J. Rauch

Upgrading language arts instruction is a major concern of building principals. To accomplish this goal, administrators attempt to generate innovations, such as content area reading strategies, microcomputer applications, and reading-writing links. These and other ideas can positively affect language arts instruction and can initially be carried out with the support of concerned educators. After initial implementation, however, the principal is faced with the major challenge of sustaining or institutionalizing the innovations. By definition, institutionalization refers to innovations that become a durable part of the school program. They manage to continue "by somehow getting 'built in' to the life of the school." (Miles, 1983) Principals are in a key position to support the duration of worthwhile ideas and therefore can be an active force in seeing that these innovations are "built in" to school programs. Specifically, what can principals do? Experience and research, fortunately, provide some insights and direction for building administrators.

Innovations Should Solve Problems

Since most innovations are considered in the context of remedying school problems, educators should determine the local problems and discuss specific ways of solving them. This approach lessens the chances of implementing fashionable ideas whose short life spans have little pertinence to a school's problems. Rauch (1974) advised caution and careful study by administrators before accepting descriptions of innovative programs in newspapers and journals as valid and impartial judgments. He described the successful administrator as one who "encourages and supports experimentation and innovation. He/She is never satisfied with the status quo. At the same time, he/she doesn't abandon a successful program because of publicity given to a 'new' reading method because some school board member confuses exploratory research with a definitive study." Tanner (1983) provides a striking example of an innovation not fitting a school context. In 1969, the Ford Foundation attempted to apply aspects of the British open classroom to the American inner-city school system. All the optimistic reports about the beneficial aspects of the British programs convinced many American educators that it was the answer to their problems, despite the lack of carefully controlled studies. The open classroom concept reflected less structure which apparently was well-matched to the needs of British children. However, this concept led to disappointing results, particularly with American inner-city children, who generally needed more direct structure and guidance.

This experience from history (as well as others, a recent example being a series of articles in The New York Times questioning the highly publicized use of computers in the classroom) supports an argument for linking innovations to specific problem solving. The principal can provide such a link by bringing together key personnel (including the

assistant superintendent for instruction, the language arts coordinator, and English teachers) at meetings of the Principal's Advisory Council, the Language Arts Curriculum Council, or other appropriate meetings. The beginning focus of these meetings is to clarify a school problem and to generate ideas for solving it. Proposed innovations usually reflect implications for curriculum development, budget, staffing, facilities, inservice education, and evaluation. Limitations such as time needed for researching the problem and training key personnel also are considered. This approach represents the first step in bringing about lasting innovations that specifically fit the school context.

What Else Is Needed?

Beyond identifying a problem and suggesting solutions, sustaining a program involves other efforts. Unfortunately, these efforts are complex especially as they relate to different school settings. Miles (1983) attempts to clarify this problem by presenting four scenarios based on a study of twelve elementary and secondary schools. (Crandall and associates, 1982; Huberman and Miles, 1982) The most effective scenario consisted of the following factors: a district office administrator applied substantial pressure on educators to carry out the newly developed reading program. Although this mandated approach first lowered the educators' commitment, considerable assistance was provided which upgraded their competence with the innovation as well as their subsequent cooperation. Organizational changes were made, including teacher teaming, pupil rotation, and scheduling (which increased student impact). These aspects, combined with program leadership stability, generated more use of the innovation and resulted in a lasting program. "The general picture is one of

administrative decisiveness, accompanied by enough assistance to increase user skill, ownership, and stable use in the context of a stable system." (Miles, 1983, p. 18)

A second successful scenario was also described, but this one avoided the mandating of the innovation. Rather, it focused on assisting the educators and building their commitment. The emphasis here was on cooperative problem solving and suggestions for implementing the program. The responsibility for making key decisions was shared.

These two scenarios were the most effective in promoting the durability of innovations. Even though crises developed, stability was maintained.

Cautions

Two potential crises that could threaten the long-term quality of innovations are environmental turbulence and job mobility. The former problem concerns budget cuts as well as declining student enrollment; the latter threat concerns educators moving on to new positions either because of career advancement or funding cuts. Both crises are threats to lasting programs, and administrators must, therefore, work at preventing them during the implementation of worthwhile ideas.

Preventive strategies include developing a district office item for the budget that protects against future cuts and providing opportunities for many individuals to share their competence and responsibility. (Loucks and Zacchei, 1983) For example, in one successful school where an important idea was implemented, "the decision to create a district-wide management group for the innovation, involving both teachers and administrators, nurtured stability even though the principal and the coordinator

were both leaving." (Miles, 1983, p. 19) Thus, structural and procedural changes significantly protected the innovation against potential threats.

Adaptation

In sustaining quality programs, a major factor is strong leadership that is specifically and continuously involved in all phases of implementation. The building principal is a key person who can stabilize language arts innovations by directing them toward solving school problems, by working with all concerned personnel, by providing substantial assistance, and by eliminating or lessening threats to durability. Since the most successful scenario (discussed previously) represents a mandated use of ideas, such an approach may be controversial and ineffective in certain school settings. For example, some schools may be staffed with a large number of unionized, mid-life professionals who may resist an authoritarian approach. Mandating the innovation, therefore, might lead to negative results and might lower administrative credibility in the present and in the future. Realizing these potentially negative outcomes, the principal should not give in to status quo mediocrity but rather should consider a balance of supporting innovations while being sensitive to staff needs. Sensitivity is shown in varied ways, including demonstrating objectively that use of the idea will benefit teachers and students, freeing faculty to attend full-day workshops spaced over the school year, working with staff during the development of curricula, providing a budget to assure sufficient equipment and materials, complimenting staff members for their genuine efforts, and serving as liaison between district office personnel and teachers. Implicit in these roles is the need for a principal who is knowledgeable, articulate, organized, flexible, and supportive. Expecting an administrator to possess all of these characteristics may seem unreasonable or over-optimistic. However, these administrative traits are

necessary in maintaining respect and credibility during a period of change and growth.

Application

During the past two decades, the writers have been involved (one as coordinator of English/Reading, K-12; the other as university consultant) with carrying out a variety of language arts innovations at the Hauppauge School District, Long Island, New York. As they reflect on some of the long-term successes, the writers realize that certain important factors that led to positive implementation are supported by educational research and literature.

One example of a lasting innovation is the District's language arts program for the gifted. (Sanacore, 1981; Sanacore and Frost-Distler, 1980) Although this program does not represent all aspects of the previous discussion, it does reflect the application of certain attributes presented in this discussion. Feedback from teachers, students, and parents revealed a problem of challenging gifted learners during regular English instruction. This problem was verified through meetings with the community and the faculty as well as through observations of classroom lessons. In addition, English teachers completed a modified version of curriculum mapping which helped to distinguish the written curriculum from the taught curriculum. The results indicated that although teachers were adopting the language arts guidelines, they were not challenging gifted students with sufficient frequency and consistency. Consequently, a team was established which consisted of the building principal, the English/reading coordinator (K-12), the assistant superintendent for instruction, the board of education, teachers, and parents.

Cooperatively, they discussed specific approaches to educating gifted students at Hauppauge. These discussions were enriched by visitations to school districts where gifted programs had been implemented. The team also read extensively and consulted with university personnel about gifted language arts programs. Such experiences led to a philosophy for the gifted at the Hauppauge School District which, in turn, generated curricular design, program structure, staff selection, and student selection criteria. The assistant superintendent for instruction also provided an assurance that budgetary considerations, staffing, and inservice workshops would be continued. At all stages of program implementation, the District's building principals and the English/reading coordinator were actively involved. (For example, they provided funds for materials, and they included gifted language arts sections in the master schedule.) Interestingly, during the program's seven-year duration, three middle school principals had served as educational leaders, and three teachers of the gifted were transferred to other positions. The innovation was, nonetheless, stabilized because key personnel shared major decision-making responsibilities. In addition, the entire staff demonstrated commitment to the program and received ongoing, updated support from the English/reading coordinator and the assistant superintendent. Although the District's approach was not mandated, strong leadership prevailed during all phases of maintaining the innovation. Especially noteworthy was middle management's role (even the newly appointed principals) in nurturing the daily dynamics necessary for continued success.

Summary

Initiating worthwhile ideas is easier than maintaining

them. The initial enthusiasm and desire for the new program may carry us over the first hurdle or two. But beyond the bloom of talk about innovation lies months and years of sustained effort. Fortunately, experience and research provide some guidance in carrying out durable language arts innovations. Key factors seem to be directing the innovations at solving specific problems, sharing decision-making responsibilities, upgrading and updating the staff's competence and commitment, making organizational changes, preventing threats to long-term success, and adapting and applying important factors to school settings. Strong leadership, especially at the middle management level, is vital for program success since such leadership can mean the difference between mediocre and substantive implementation. Although none of the ideas presented here provide a guarantee of success for all school systems, they should be considered in the context of school adaptation.

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